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ABSTRACT

With the focus on language, culture, and communication in the national standards for foreign language learning, foreign language teachers are continually searching for better ways of accessing authentic materials and providing experiences that will improve their students knowledge and skills in these target areas. This digest highlights a number of Internet applications that can be used to enrich the foreign language classroom: electronic mail; electronic lists; electronic journals; the World Wide Web; streaming audio and video; search engines; remote access to libraries and databases; file transfer; and chat, audio, and video communication. (Author/JL)

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Internet Technologies for Authentic Language Learning Experiences

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With the focus on language, communication, and culture in the national standards for foreign language learning (1996), foreign language teachers are continually searching for better ways of accessing authentic materials and providing experiences that will improve their students' knowledge and skills in these target areas. As the Internet transforms communication around the world, it is natural that it should play a major role in the foreign language classroom.

The Internet enables computers throughout the world to communicate. To do this, each computer must have its own Internet address, be connected to the net, and be able to talk the same language, TCP/IP. Any kind of computer can be networked in this way. Internet applications are computer programs that know how to use the Internet to interact. Many Internet applications use a client/server relationship where a client computer requests information from a server computer that sends the requested files. Other applications use a peer-to-peer relationship in which the computers exchange information in both directions. These packets of information are sent from computer to computer, sometimes passing through many intermediaries before arriving at their destination; nevertheless, this process is usually extremely rapid. What matters to the typical foreign language professional are not these technical details but the software that enables communication over the Internet and how it can enhance the classroom experience. The wide range of these programs (text, image, sound, video, multimedia) makes them powerful additions to the foreign language teacher's repertoire. This digest highlights a number of Internet applications that can be used to enrich the foreign language classroom.

Electronic Mail

Email was in use before the Internet as we know it today even existed and is probably the most commonly used Internet application. With a single email account, foreign language teachers can integrate email-based activities into their curriculum (LeLoup, 1997). For example, international keypal projects that enable students to correspond with native speakers of the target language are easily implemented where participants have the necessary access, equipment, and foreign contacts (Knight, 1994; Shelley, 1996). Distance learning is another curricular area where email is being used (Ponterio, 1996).

Electronic Lists

Electronic discussion groups or "lists" (sometimes referred to as "LISTSERVs") use email to provide a forum where people of similar interests can participate in a professional dialog and share resources. Hundreds of lists of interest to language teachers are available on the Internet (see, for example, http://alabanza.com/kabacoff/Inter-Links/listserv.html to search for scholarly electronic lists). Some are service lists such as the LLTI (Language Learning and Technology International) list, which distributes information about all aspects of the technology used in language teaching; the IECC (Intercultural E-Mail Classroom Connections, K-12) list, which provides a service for teachers seeking partner classrooms for international and cross-cultural electronic mail exchanges. Others are language specific and address topics as specific and diverse as their membership warrants. FLTEACH, the Foreign Language Teaching Forum, is a good example of a list that cuts across language lines to discuss methodology, instructional innovation, professional articulation, and enhanced student learning, among other topics. Participation in electronic discussion lists can be a useful tool for professional development, particularly for educators who are isolated geographically or within their districts from other teachers of the same language (LeLoup & Ponterio, 1995a, 1995b).

When participating in discussions, certain rules and protocols (netiquette) should be observed. Following list guidelines and learning how to accurately express and gauge the tenor of a post or response (often by using smiley faces) are very important skills in this faceless communications environment. In addition, some lists are very active, and keeping up with the messages may be a daunting job.

Electronic Journals

Several electronic journals target foreign language professionals. Generally, these journals are free, are published quarterly, and do not exist in paper form. There are a number of reasons for publishing a journal electronically. First, by using electronic communications technologies, electronic journals can reach a large and diverse audience in a timely manner. Second, the hypermedia nature of Web-based journals enables articles to include links to related background information located elsewhere on the Web. Third, many of these journals have a technology focus, and electronic dissemination illustrates many of the technologies treated in a given issue. Of particular interest is *Language Learning & Technology (LL&T)*, which disseminates research on issues related to technology and language education (http://polyglot.cal.msu.edu/llt). Another journal that deals with timely topics in language education is *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language: An Electronic Journal (TESL-EJ)* (http://www-writing.berkeley.edu/TESL-EJ/).

World Wide Web

Although it is only one of the various Internet applications, the Web browser may be the only one that many people know. Thanks to its flexibility and integration of other services, the Web represents the broadest and most powerful Internet application. Its defining element is the hypertext link, which allows anything on one page to link to something on any other page in the world. The multimedia nature of the Web and the use of the Web page as an interface to other services have greatly expanded the power of the Internet by making it possible to display information using a combination of formats (Fidelman, 1996). This is essential for the delivery of authentic materials in the form of texts, images, sound recordings, video clips, and even virtual reality worlds. For some media formats, additional helper applications or plug-ins must be downloaded and installed to

enhance the Web browser. In addition, sophisticated programming functions, such as CGI and JavaScript, can turn a Web page into an interactive computer program. This can allow the student to work in interesting ways with the authentic materials found on the page.

Streaming Audio and Video

One way of connecting students with native speakers and authentic materials is by using the technologies of streaming audio and video, which virtually transport the target language environment to the second language classroom without wasting time downloading huge files. Students can hear live or pre-recorded broadcasts of music, news, sports, and weather from countries around the world or watch the nightly news from France or live TV from Chile transmitted to their computer in real-time. This technology is in its infancy but is being developed and improved at a rapid rate. An Internet search will keep the foreign language teacher up to date on the latest free streaming media software that will place target language audio and video files a click away.

Search Engines

A search engine is an on-line "private eye" that does detective work for the user. Search engines use keywords to find any site (documents, files, Web pages) that contains those words. Some even calculate a probability of the degree of relationship so the listing of hits is presented in order from most to least likely to be what is sought. The Web is a vast place, and trying to navigate it and locate desired information without search engines would be a formidable task at best.

The Web has numerous search engines (e.g., Yahoo, Altavista, WWW Worm, WebCrawler); many are language specific (e.g., Olé, Encuéntrelo, Crawler.de Suche, FOCUS Suche, Il ragno italiano, LOKACE, ECILA, SAPO). Each one performs a little differently, so experimentation aids in the decision of which to employ for a given search. It takes frequent practice to become adept at structuring queries that generate optimal search results.

Remote Access to Libraries and Databases

Many library catalogs, bibliographic resources, and other types of databases are available on the Internet. Gopher, telnet, and the Web are all applications that enable users to access these databases on their own computers. The ERIC database is one example of an important resource accessible via the Web (http://ericir.syr.edu), making it easy for teachers to locate Digests, Minibibs, and articles of interest on-line.The system of Gopher menus is analogous to a virtual card catalog (Krohl, 1993). All of these menus are connected, making up a vast Gopherspace.

File Transfer

File transfer protocol (FTP) enables users to move files between accounts on different computers wherever they might be, at home and at the office or even in different cities, as long as both computers have Internet addresses. The requirements are an FTP server running on a remote machine and an FTP client running on the local machine. Requests are sent via client software located on the desktop to a remote server located somewhere on the Internet, which performs the service of returning the requested information. The two major ways of using FTP are by moving files between computers on which the user has accounts, or retrieving files from an anonymous FTP server that is open to the public. This latter use is transparent in many instances; users are often unaware that numerous files are downloaded from the Web via FTP.

Chat, Audio, and Video Communication

Real-time communication takes place via several different types of chat, audio, and video communication programs. One such application is Internet Relay Chat (IRC), which enables synchronous "conversation" among participants anywhere in the world. Users enter a channel and "talk" by typing messages to all of the other people on that channel; everything that is typed is seen instantly by everyone. Hundreds of channels exist, with names usually reflecting the topics and language discussed (e.g., français). Private closed channels can also be created for use in the classroom.

Audio and video communication programs, such as CUSeeMe and MS NetMeeting, are other options for engaging foreign language students in synchronous conversation. Users can talk directly to their interlocutor and, using the proper software, even see and be seen by the person they are addressing. These applications take a large amount of bandwidth and depend on a clear and direct Internet connection; network traffic will also affect the results. Though only in the initial phases of development, these new technologies are already powerful and have the potential of making a tremendous impact on the ability of students to communicate directly with native speakers in target language environments.

Conclusion

In the end it is incumbent upon the foreign language teacher to integrate these tools into the curriculum in a meaningful way. Clearly, target language communication and cultures are well within reach through current and emerging technologies, and information about using these resources is readily available on-line. The intrepid and creative teacher will venture into this virtual realm, find authentic resources, and use them to make the second language classroom a marvelous place to learn.

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